

How to Mulch A Tree

MORE IS NOT NECESSARILY BETTER. By Jill Jesiolowski Cebenکو

Mulching a tree seems natural. After all, mulch helps re-create the forest environment, where decaying leaves, twigs, and branches blanket the ground. As they break down, they slowly feed the trees, and they help the soil stay moist. Plus, the natural carpet looks nice.

What is unnatural is the current practice of making gopher mounds of mulch around the base of trees. Not sure what I mean? Drive around your neighborhood and look, especially at newly landscaped areas. There they stand --- poor, helpless trees being swallowed by wood-chip piles the size of the Great Pyramid (well, almost). Not only do those mounds look unnatural, but they also hurt the trees by depriving roots of air and water.

Below are the basic steps to mulching a tree the right way. Use whatever mulch works for you—bark, compost, or shredded leaves, for example. If you want to apply wood chips, make sure they are fully composted. Uncomposted wood chips will tie up soil nitrogen as they decompose, starving your tree. By mulching correctly, you'll do less weeding, watering, and fertilizing. (Mulch provides all the nutrients your tree will need.) And your tree will thank you.

[1] KEEP MULCH 6 TO 12 INCHES AWAY from the trunk. Mulch helps to hold in moisture; that's a good thing – except when mulch is piled against a tree trunk. Tree trunks, unlike tree roots, are not adapted to being moist all the time. By putting mulch too close to the trunk, you risk problems with moisture-loving insects, fungi, and rodents.

[2] APPLY MULCH so that when it settles, the layer is no more than 2 to 3 inches deep. If mulch is applied too deeply (or has a fine texture like sawdust), air and water may have a hard time penetrating the mulch layer.

[3] SPREAD MULCH all over the ground directly below the tree's canopy. (This area is known as the drip line.) Doing so keeps grass from competing with tree roots. It also prevents injury to the tree trunk due to a close shave with the lawn mower or string trimmer. Finally, it allows more of the tree's root system to benefit from the moisture-conserving advantages of mulch.